

The Good in Doubt: A Comparison of Faith Through the Lenses of Scholars

By Cecil Hammett

I was only fifteen years old when a harmless trip to an urgent care, for what I thought was just an ordinary cold, would evolve to the most crucial moment of my life. A nurse practitioner I'd never seen before walked into my room looking as if she had seen a ghost. With sorrow and pity in her eyes she placed a chest X-ray on the screen that looked nearly demolished in tumors. In a state of pure denial I slowly looked to the bottom right corner of the X-ray for the name praying they had the wrong patient— Hammett, Cecil E. That was my chest. I had cancer. Terrance Tilley states that faith is entirely incompatible without doubt. You must doubt your faith to have the ability to commit to it fully. I believe every person must have pain in their life to have the ability to fully embrace the beauty. One will not truly understand their religion until they have felt the complete silence of believing there is no one, or nothing, there.

Terrance Tilley defines faith as “the relationship between one and the irreducible energizing source of meaning and center of value in ones life” (26). By clarifying faith can never be alluded to solely religion, Tilley notes that every person has faith in something. Whether that is oneself, humanity, nature, science, or God it is humanly impossible to be “without faith.” All of us have some form of “energizing source of meaning” that brings value to our life (30). Tilley, Freud, and Wiman describe three immensely different instances of finding faith yet they all can be unified in the fact that each of them found their faith, or purpose, through attempts of reasoning with the mystery of life. The first time someone said they were praying for me I wanted to scream. For someone to even speak of this so called “God” in a way of glory made me just as

sick as the chemo. God did this to me and they were just throwing his name in my face like he was some form of sweet release. At that time, God seemed like the farthest thing from happiness. Religion felt more like a mask that everyone in my town wore for reputation, not faith. I, like Wiman, grew up in a mid-sized southern town. Almost everyone I knew called themselves “Christians.” Christianity, in fact, was more of a way of fitting in than an actual religion. How is a young girl battling for her life supposed to turn to faith in her darkest moment when all that faith was to her is a reminder of the town she never felt like she belonged in? Through all my resentment what I failed to realize is that I was indeed, as Tilley would put it, “a fish out of water.” This strong sense of denial I felt for God was actually me crying out for him. Every time I screamed at what seemed like nothing or no one was, in reality, me pleading to God for a form of release.

On the day of my diagnosis I believed my life was truly over. The likeliness of a full recovery was so slim I began to contemplate if undergoing treatment would even be my best option. Wiman introduces the effects of chemo in a way that one would believe it to be in most sense, worse than dying. He emphasizes how it “destroyed his mind” to the point where he could not even indulge in simple American pleasures like reading and watching TV. He notes how the hours in the hospital had a certain “palpable thickness” to them. I believed this was my fate, to die at fifteen. Was my life an error? I found myself questioning my purpose. Only a few months shy of a mere sixteen years old and I was clinging to life with a grasp that felt as if it would give at any moment. “Why me? I thought you cared about me!” I would scream to a God who seemed as if he had completely stopped listening.

Many claim everyone has a purpose in life, but what was mine? I was too young to have a drivers license yet I was faced with a decision that would determine the rest of my life. Wiman

describes how “life is not an error, even when it is”(7) and certain occurrences in ones life lead them to the path of finding true faith. What I failed to realize at fifteen is my diagnosis was indeed not an error. It was the exact opposite. My diagnosis is what fueled me to find my “irreducible energizing source of meaning and center of value in [my] life” (Tilley, 26). The faith that became visible to me after fighting pediatric cancer proved that it was not solely affected by my experiences but “immediately dependent upon it.”(Wiman, 7) Day after day I to sat in a hospital room trying to find faith in reason or the purpose of my illness. Essentially what I was searching for does not exist. I learned through life experience what Wiman truly meant when he said “faith cannot save you from the claims of reason,”(7) but it can protect you from losing control when reason, if there even is one, attempts to claim you.

I can parallel my attempts of reasoning with my faith with Sigmund Freud’s attempts of finding a reason for faith. Freud, as a modernist, believes religion to be an illusion, a sense of protection and escape from the harsh reality of the world. He sees no “pure fact” or “pure reason” in religion; therefore one is incapable of finding truth in religion or contentment in relying on faith to drive your beliefs. One may say Sigmund Freud appeared to be “without faith;” however, Freud did have a faith—science. He claims even the idea of believing in a higher being will soon be overcome by science, which can give explanations beyond religion. I for some time during my illness contemplated this theory myself. When the positive effects of chemotherapy began to show I questioned the point of even believing in God. I would think to myself, “God is not what is healing me, science and the substantial leaps it has taken in the evolution of medicine is the reason I am still alive.” Ten years ago my form of blood cancer had a 2% survival rate. To hear you had stage three Anaplastic Large Cell Non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 2007 was a death sentence, a terminal illness no doctor or form of chemotherapy could save

you from. Yet through the evolution of science and cancer research they now have a regiment that is effective in most cases. Science is the reason I am alive today, how could my faith not be in science? I found comfort in science and I felt at ease in that. Science always has reason. In science you do not have to “bet your life on it,”(Tilley 7) the facts are right in front of you, and there is “proof” for it all. So for one to revoke all beliefs in religion and solely believe in science seemed not only perfectly plausible to me but completely comfortable— a word not used very often when describing a search for faith in God. Comfortable, however, is not what faith should be. Settling means you’ve given up, you’ve stopped searching. I can not agree with Freud on this aspect. To center ones entire existence around science seems to me like more of an illusion than believing in God. Science is not only written by humans, but it is written to be disproven. The “theory of evolution” and the “theory of quantum physics” are just that, theories. Science is always subject to change. Religion will evolve with society, but the basis will never change. By having faith in God I am either one of two things: insane or correct. I will not know which of the two I am until the end of my days, but I have comfort in believing the day I die will be the day I transcend into eternal happiness. Freud, by having faith in science alone, does not have this pleasure. To believe the only happiness one will ever obtain is through worldly pleasures in a world that is scarred by pain and cruelty, is just hopeless. Religion is not only protection form the world while we live in it, but salvation from it when we leave it. Freud, through science, conformed his entire existence to the small box of reason, while I chose to take “a leap of faith” and open up to the unknown, not to question it, but live in symmetry with it.

In what felt like a hyper second my “nonexistent” faith evolved into a feeling inside me that was larger than I ever thought possible. It wrecked me. God wrecked me. It was then when I felt complete remorse and sorrow for my total denial of the one being that could cure me. “I

never truly felt the pain of unbelief until I began to believe” (Wiman 12). When Wiman talks about the moment he finally came to faith he says what baffled him the most were how “[his] evasions and confusions, which [he] had mistaken for a strong sense of purpose, had expressed themselves in [his] life” (12). I to was taken back when I realized everything I thought to be doing “alone” was never truly alone. To wholly submit myself to Christianity I had to fully believe that no matter what the outcome of my illness was, it would be good. Think about that for a second. I had to be completely okay with dying at fifteen years old. That was not easy. Then again, faith is not supposed to be easy. Wiman and Tilley can attest to that. However, once the feeling of total and complete submission to Christianity overpowered me I was fully prepared to risk my life.

I, unlike Wiman, am unsure if I would be writing about my faith with such passion if it was not for my illness. Yet, I fully believe God connects with every person on a different level. “We cannot have absolute certainty in faith” (Tilley, 6) but we can choose to believe or not. To believe in a “bright abyss” or eternity is indeed a choice. My choice originated from pain. Does this mean I found faith in pain? Maybe, but I don’t view it that way. Through my pain I discovered the true meaning of life. It was not science which allowed me to survive an illness that has the power to kill 7 million people a year. It was not my parents or the people in my towns faith. It was my faith. Doubting my faith was the greatest thing I could have ever experienced. Questioning my faith only brought me closer to it. Through the silence, I realized the noise God was making all along. I just had to figure out how to listen.

Works Cited

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